



The Principal's Leadership in Building a Culture of Discipline at School Background: A Case Study of Public Elementary School 065/XI in Desa Baru Debai

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Abstract

This study aims to gain a deep understanding of how school principals build a culture of discipline through experiences, practices, and social dynamics occurring within the school environment. The research employs a qualitative approach using the case study method, involving a single participant the school principal through purposive sampling. Data were collected via in-depth interviews and observations, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning emerging from the participant's experiences. The research findings reveal three main themes: exemplary leader ship practices, social processes in the formation of a culture of discipline, and contextual and non-linear challenges and impacts. These findings reveal that discipline is not merely the result of structural control but a social construction shaped through interaction, negotiation of meaning, and collective experience. This study makes a theoretical contribution by expanding the understanding of educational leader ship as a relational and contextual practice, as well as practical implications for the development of more humanistic and sustainable educational policies and strategies.



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Introduction

The issue of discipline in elementary schools remains a real challenge in educational practice. In everyday school life, students are still often seen arriving late, failing to follow school rules, and exhibiting behavior that does not yet reflect an internal sense of discipline. This situation indicates that discipline has not yet become a matter of self-awareness but remains merely compliance with formal rules. Research shows that school culture plays an important role in shaping student behavior through collectively established values, norms, and habits (Agustina, 2018). In addition, poor discipline is also linked to suboptimal management of the school's organizational culture, which is influenced by the principal's leadership (Kurniaty, 2021). In other contexts, ineffective leadership by the principal can result in a lack of discipline among both students and the school community in general (Aswan & Ahyani, 2021).

Based on the results of initial observations conducted at State Elementary School 065/XI in Desa Baru Debai, it was found that although disciplinary rules have been formally established in the form of school regulations, their implementation has not been consistent in daily practice. This inconsistency is evident in the fact that some students still arrive late, fail to comply with the dress code, and lack discipline in participating in classroom activities. In practice, the enforcement of discipline often depends on individual teachers' supervision and has not yet become a deeply rooted collective culture. Exploratory interviews revealed that there are challenges in building a shared awareness of the importance of discipline as a value that must be internalized. This underscores that the development of a culture of discipline is not merely structural in nature, but is also a social process involving interaction, habit formation, and leadership. Research shows that school principals serve as role models, catalysts, and supervisors in fostering a culture of discipline through communication strategies and ongoing guidance (Ihsan, 2025). In addition, parental involvement and ongoing supervision are also important factors in fostering a culture of discipline among students (Syamsul Falah, 2023). These efforts become even more effective when the principal is able to foster collaboration among the entire school community to create a supportive environment (Osman, 2012).

In a broader context, the principal's leadership plays a strategic role in shaping the school's organizational culture, including its culture of discipline. The principal serves not only as an administrator but also as a leader in learning who is capable of driving change and fostering collective commitment. Research shows that a school's success in achieving its educational goals depends heavily on the quality of the principal's leadership in managing and developing the school's culture (Syamsuddin, 2020). Effective leadership is characterized by the ability to build a shared vision, foster effective communication, and instill positive values in the daily practices of the school community (Shahin et al., 2024). In addition, the leadership of the school principal has also been shown to have a significant influence on workplace discipline and organizational culture, which in turn affect the overall quality of education (Purwoko, 2018).

However, a review of the literature indicates that most studies on school principal leadership and discipline are still dominated by quantitative approaches that focus on the relationships between variables. Such approaches tend to yield generalizations but have not yet been able to explore in depth how leadership processes are carried out in real-life school settings. In fact, qualitative research shows that school principal leadership involves a complex process that encompasses social interactions, subjective experiences, and cultural dynamics that evolve contextually (Syamsul Falah, 2023). In addition, previous research has focused more on teacher discipline than on student discipline as part of the overall school culture (Rosmayni et al., 2023). Another limitation is the lack of studies that explore leadership practices in depth in fostering a culture of discipline at the elementary school level (Ihsan, 2025). This indicates a research gap that needs to be further explored through a qualitative approach.

The urgency of this research is increasingly relevant in the context of 21st-century education, which emphasizes character building as an integral part of the educational process. Discipline is understood not merely as compliance with rules, but as a value that fosters students' sense of responsibility, integrity, and independence. In this context, school principals play a strategic role in creating an environment that supports the internalization of these values. Research shows that effective leadership can build a school culture through setting a good example, fostering habits, and continuously reinforcing values (Sutino et al., 2021). In addition, leadership grounded in values and an ethical culture can also improve the quality of the educational environment and foster the holistic development of students' character (Luthfi Anis Muadzin & Sunarto Sunarto, 2025). Therefore, a more in-depth study is needed to understand how school principals exercise their leadership in fostering a culture of discipline in a contextual manner (Syamsuddin, 2020b).

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to analyze the leadership of elementary school principals in fostering a culture of discipline in elementary schools. The urgency of this study stems from the fact that various problems still exist in the implementation of discipline within school settings, indicating that while the leadership of elementary school principals plays a strategic role, it has not yet been fully optimized in fostering a sustainable culture of discipline. A number of previous studies have shown that school principals' leadership has a significant impact on work discipline and behavior in the school environment, among both teachers and students (Kurniaty, 2021). In addition, the dynamics of school culture and the organizational climate also play a role in determining the success of discipline-building efforts, making a more contextual and reflective leadership approach necessary (Haekal et al., 2025). However, most previous studies have focused on quantitative approaches and have not yet shed much light on the dimensions of experience, meaning, and the deeper social processes involved in such leadership practices. Therefore, this study is important to bridge that gap with a qualitative approach that places greater emphasis

on contextual understanding. The study focuses on the processes, strategies, and leadership practices employed in fostering a culture of discipline within the school environment. This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to enriching the study of educational leadership based on a qualitative approach, particularly in understanding the dimensions of experience, meaning, and social processes in the formation of a culture of discipline. In addition, from a practical standpoint, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a reference for school principals, teachers, and policymakers in developing effective leadership strategies to foster a sustainable culture of discipline in elementary schools.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using the case study method, as it aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of principal leadership in fostering a culture of discipline in elementary schools within a real-world context. This approach allows the researcher to explore social dynamics, processes, and interactions in a holistic and contextual manner, thereby yielding a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Kobandaha et al., 2024). Qualitative research also emphasizes the exploration of subjective meanings and experiences that cannot be explained through quantitative approaches. The participant selection strategy employs purposive sampling, which involves selecting informants based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives, thereby enhancing the accuracy and depth of the data collected (Campbell et al., 2020). There was one participant in this study: a 53-year-old school principal with the initials RA, who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) serving as a school principal, (2) having experience leading an elementary school, and (3) being directly involved in fostering a culture of discipline. The study was conducted at State Elementary School 065/XI in Desa Baru Debai as the social context of the research, which was selected because of its relevance to the focus of the study. The research was conducted in a natural setting to obtain authentic data that reflects actual conditions in the field.

Data collection methods included in-depth interviews and observations. Interviews were used to explore the experiences, perspectives, and leadership strategies of school principals, while observations were conducted to directly observe leadership practices and the implementation of a culture of discipline within the school environment. The data collection process was supported by voice recorders and field notes to ensure the accuracy of the information. The interview procedure was conducted systematically through the following stages: participant recruitment, obtaining informed consent, scheduling, conducting semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes, and using probing techniques to elicit more in-depth information. After the interviews, verbatim transcripts were prepared and member checks were conducted to ensure the validity of the data. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involved the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions based on the emerging themes. To ensure the validity of the data,

this study employed criteria for trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Belle & Chemen, 2025). In addition, this study also adhered to research ethics by obtaining participants' consent, maintaining the confidentiality of their identities through the use of initials, and ensuring that the entire research process was conducted transparently and responsibly.

Table 1. Verbatim Transcript

No.	Code	Interview Stage	Utterance (Verbatim)	Description
1	Researcher	Opening	<i>"Assalamu'alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh, Sir. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview."</i>	Opening
2	RA	Opening	<i>"Wa'alaikumsalam warahmatullahi wabarakatuh. Yes, please."</i>	Initial response
3	Researcher	Opening	<i>"This interview is for research on school principal leadership. Are you willing to be interviewed and recorded?"</i>	Informed consent
4	RA	Opening	<i>"Yes, I agree."</i>	Consent
5	Researcher	Main	<i>"How do you interpret discipline at this school?"</i>	Main question
6	RA	Main	<i>"Discipline is not only about rules... but also about habits. Students do something not because they are afraid, but because they are already accustomed to it."</i>	Meaning of discipline
7	Researcher	Main	<i>"How do you build such habits?"</i>	Exploration
8	RA	Main	<i>"I start with myself... arriving early and setting an example. If I do not set an example, it is difficult."</i>	Role modeling
9	Researcher	Main	<i>"What strategies do you use to implement discipline?"</i>	Strategy question
10	RA	Main	<i>"I do not immediately take a strict approach... I talk to them first and ask about the reasons. But there are still limits."</i>	Humanistic approach
11	Researcher	Main	<i>"Is this approach immediately effective?"</i>	Clarification
12	RA	Main	<i>"Not immediately... it takes time. I keep reminding them."</i>	Process
13	Researcher	Main	<i>"What is the biggest challenge in building discipline?"</i>	Exploration
14	RA	Main	<i>"The challenge comes from the students' backgrounds... some of them come from homes where discipline is not practiced."</i>	Social challenges
15	Researcher	Main	<i>"What is the role of teachers in this regard?"</i>	Role question
16	RA	Main	<i>"Teachers are very important, but not all of them are consistent yet."</i>	Teacher's role
17	Researcher	Main	<i>"What is the impact of that inconsistency?"</i>	In-depth exploration
18	RA	Main	<i>"Students become confused because the rules are not the same."</i>	Social dynamics
19	Researcher	Main	<i>"How do you deal with this?"</i>	Strategy
20	RA	Main	<i>"I invite them to discuss and hold meetings... but it has to be done gradually."</i>	Leadership
21	Researcher	Main	<i>"Do you experience any dilemmas?"</i>	Exploration
22	RA	Main	<i>"Yes, often... I have to be firm while also protecting the students' feelings."</i>	Dilemma
23	Researcher	Main	<i>"Have there been any changes?"</i>	Evaluation

24	RA	Main	<i>"There have been changes; the students are more orderly... but it is not yet optimal."</i>	Impact
25	Researcher	Main	<i>"What do you consider the key to success?"</i>	Synthesis
26	RA	Main	<i>"The key is consistency and setting an example."</i>	Key factor
27	Researcher	Main	<i>"How do you feel about carrying out this role?"</i>	Reflection
28	RA	Main	<i>"Sometimes I feel tired... but this is a responsibility."</i>	Reflection
29	Researcher	Main	<i>"What are your hopes for the future?"</i>	Main closing question
30	RA	Main	<i>"I hope discipline becomes a habit, not something students do out of fear."</i>	Hope
31	Researcher	Closing	<i>"Thank you very much for your time, Sir."</i>	Closing
32	RA	Closing	<i>"Yes, you're welcome."</i>	Response
33	Researcher	Closing	<i>"If clarification is needed, I will contact you again."</i>	Clarification
34	RA	Closing	<i>"Please do."</i>	Agreement
35	Researcher	Closing	<i>"Assalamu'alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh."</i>	Closing
36	RA	Closing	<i>"Wa'alaikumsalam warahmatullahi wabarakatuh."</i>	Closing

HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

Result

The findings of this study are based on a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with the participant (RA), who is a school principal. The analysis was conducted by identifying patterns of meaning that emerged from the participant's experiences, practices, and reflections on building a culture of discipline at school. The research findings were grouped into three main themes: (1) school principals' leadership practices in fostering a culture of discipline, (2) the social processes and dynamics involved in fostering a culture of discipline, and (3) the challenges and impacts of leadership in fostering a culture of discipline.

Table 2. Thematic Findings

Main Theme	Thematic Description	Representative Quotes
Principal Leadership Practices in Building a Culture of Discipline	The school day begins with a seemingly simple but meaningful routine. The participant (RA) positions himself at the school gate, welcoming students one by one. This physical presence is not merely a formality but part of an effort to build discipline through role modeling. In his experience, discipline cannot be established solely through written rules but must be practiced and embodied in everyday activities. In practice, there is tension between the desire to be firm and the need to maintain closeness with students. RA recognizes that an overly strict approach may create distance,	<i>"I always try to arrive early, stand at the front, and welcome the children. Sometimes I just greet them, but if someone is late, I gently remind them. I am not angry, but I want them to become aware."</i> <i>"Sometimes I also face a dilemma... if I am too strict, the children become afraid. But if I am too lenient, the rules will not work. So I have to adjust and consider the situation."</i>

	while an excessively lenient approach risks weakening the rules.	
Social Processes and Dynamics in the Formation of a Culture of Discipline	A culture of discipline is not formed instantly but through a social process involving interactions among the principal, teachers, and students. In his daily practice, RA maintains open communication with teachers and attempts to establish a shared understanding of the importance of discipline. However, this process does not always run smoothly. In interactions with students, RA attempts to create closeness so that discipline is not perceived as pressure. However, this closeness also creates ambiguity between being a figure who is respected and one who is perceived as approachable by students. Habituation becomes the primary strategy in this process. Routine activities such as lining up, praying, and maintaining cleanliness are not merely technical activities but social spaces in which the value of discipline is gradually internalized. Nevertheless, RA recognizes that this process does not occur uniformly among all students.	<i>"I often discuss things with the teachers, but not everyone immediately shares the same perspective. Some already understand, while others still have different ways of looking at things." "I want the children not to be afraid, but still to respect me. That is not easy... sometimes, if we become too close, they become less serious." "Some children get used to it quickly, but others have to be reminded continuously. So it really takes time; it cannot happen immediately."</i>
Challenges and Impacts of Leadership in Building a Culture of Discipline	Behind these efforts, RA faces various challenges. One of the most prominent is the difference in students' backgrounds, particularly regarding disciplinary habits developed within their families. In this context, the school often has to "start over" with disciplinary practices that were not established at home. In addition, teacher consistency in implementing rules presents another challenge. Differences in approaches among teachers create ambiguity for students in understanding the boundaries of discipline. Despite these challenges, RA has begun to observe changes, although they are not always significant or evenly distributed. These changes are reflected in more orderly student behavior, although violations still occur in certain situations.	<i>"Many children are simply not accustomed to discipline at home. So at school, we have to start from the beginning again, and that is quite difficult." "If teachers are not consistent in applying the rules, the children become confused. Sometimes they take advantage of that." "There have already been changes; the children are more orderly, but not all of them. There are still some who need to be reminded continuously."</i>

The findings of this study indicate that principal leadership in building a culture of discipline cannot be understood as a simple and linear process. Rather, such leadership takes place through reflective social practices and dynamic interactions and is influenced by various contextual factors both within and outside the school. The findings demonstrate that discipline is not merely the result of rules and regulations

but is a social construct that develops through experiences and interpersonal relationships within the school environment.

Principals' Leadership Practices in Fostering a Culture of Discipline

The leadership practices examined in this study indicate that principals fulfill their roles by setting a good example and engaging directly in school activities. This is evident from the following statements: *Praktik Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah dalam Membangun Budaya Disiplin*

"I always try to arrive early... to greet the children... and if anyone is late, I gently remind them so they'll realize it." (RA)

These findings are consistent with research indicating that school principals play a strategic role as leaders of learning who not only manage but also foster values through concrete actions in the day-to-day life of the school (Chen et al., 2017).

In addition, leadership practices also reveal a dilemma between firmness and a humanistic approach:

"Sometimes I face a dilemma too... if I'm too strict, the kids get scared. But if I'm too lenient, the rules don't get followed." (RA)

This indicates that leadership is situational and adaptive. Other studies also confirm that school principal leadership based on work culture requires the ability to balance values, strategies, and the school's social conditions (Muryanti & Sutama, 2022). Thus, leadership in this context is not merely administrative, but also reflective and contextual.

Social Processes and the Dynamics of Discipline Culture Formation

The culture of discipline in this study was shaped through social interactions among the principal, teachers, and students. This is evident from the following statements:

"I often talk with teachers... but it's true that not everyone sees eye to eye right away." (RA)

These findings indicate that the development of a culture of discipline is a collective process involving negotiation among individuals. Research shows that school principals play a key role in shaping school culture by fostering a shared vision and engaging all stakeholders (Syamsul Falah, 2023).

In addition, the dynamics of the relationship with students also reveal some ambiguity: *"I want the children not to be afraid, but still to be respectful... that's not easy."* (RA)

This indicates a tension between interpersonal relationships and authority. Other studies have revealed that a culture of discipline is formed through a process of

habituation and ongoing interaction within the school environment (Regina et al., 2023). Thus, a culture of discipline is not static, but rather the result of a dynamic and negotiated social process.

The Challenges and Impact of Leadership in Building a Culture of Discipline

Research findings indicate that challenges are an integral part of the leadership process. This is evident from the following statement:

“Banyak anak yang di rumah memang kurang dibiasakan disiplin... jadi di sekolah kita mulai dari awal lagi.” (RA)

This indicates that external factors, such as the family environment, have a significant impact on the success of instilling discipline. Research shows that a principal's leadership influences discipline, but is also influenced by the work culture and organizational environment (Rosmayni et al., 2023b).

In addition, internal challenges have also arisen:

“If teachers don't apply the rules consistently, the children get confused.” (RA)

This underscores the importance of consistency within school organizations. Other studies have also shown that leadership and organizational culture together influence work discipline and behavior in the school environment (Kurniaty, 2021).

Nevertheless, changes continue to occur:

“There have been some changes... the children are better behaved, but not all of them yet.” (RA)

These findings indicate that the impact of leadership is gradual and uneven, and unfolds over a complex, long-term process.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that a principal's leadership in fostering a culture of discipline is not mechanistic, but rather a complex, reflective, and contextual social practice. Discipline does not stem solely from formal rules, but is fostered through exemplary behavior and ongoing interactions within the school environment. This is consistent with research showing that principals play the role of both leader and educator in shaping students' disciplined character through concrete practices. This is consistent with research showing that school principals play the role of both leaders and educators in shaping students' discipline through concrete, day-to-day practices (Susanto & Handoyo, 2025). In addition, other studies confirm that the success of discipline is greatly influenced by leadership strategies implemented in collaboration with teachers as key partners in student guidance (Alam et al., 2024). Furthermore, recent studies also indicate a paradigm shift toward positive discipline,

which emphasizes a humanistic approach to school leadership (Istiqomah & Siswadi, 2026).

Regarding the topic of leadership practices, the results of this study indicate that leading by example is a key strategy in fostering a culture of discipline. Conceptually, this reinforces transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the influence of a leader's behavior on organizational members. The study shows that school principals serve as role models, motivators, and guides in improving the work discipline of teachers and students (Azkiyah et al., 2023). In addition, other studies confirm that the leadership style adopted by the principal plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of positive discipline in schools (Van Wyk & Pelser, 2014). In fact, empirical studies show that a principal's leadership is directly linked to improved student discipline through the creation of a supportive school culture (Dakhi, 2021).

Regarding the theme of social processes, the findings of this study indicate that a culture of discipline is formed through interactions and the negotiation of meaning among members of the school community. This is consistent with the social constructivist perspective, which views discipline as the result of social interaction, rather than merely a set of rules. The study shows that the implementation of positive discipline requires the active involvement of the entire school community in the process of shaping and managing student behavior (Ernawati et al., 2025). In addition, other studies confirm that work culture and leadership have a significant influence on the development of discipline in school organizations (Aswan & Ahyani, 2021). Furthermore, the study also shows that the interaction between leadership, the school environment, and discipline contributes to students' overall development (Zusriyansyah & Surianto, 2022).

On the topic of challenges and impacts, this study shows that a principal's leadership is inextricably linked to various external and internal factors that influence the success of fostering a culture of discipline. Factors such as students' backgrounds, school facilities, and teacher consistency are part of this complex dynamic. The study shows that improvements in student discipline are influenced not only by leadership but also by teacher competence and school facilities (Kobandaha et al., 2024). In addition, other studies have revealed that social barriers and teachers' circumstances are factors that hinder the enforcement of discipline in schools (Garina Siskawati et al., 2024). Meanwhile, other studies show that school principals' leadership continues to play a crucial role in maintaining discipline even during crises such as the pandemic (Bramesta & Suwadi, 2023).

Reflectively, this study shows that school principal leadership cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which it takes place. As a member of the educational community, the researcher has close ties to the context under study,

which allows for a deeper understanding but also requires awareness of potential biases in data interpretation.

Theoretically, this study contributes by broadening the understanding that educational leadership is not merely a structural process but a social practice involving interaction, meaning, and contextual dynamics. A culture of discipline is understood as the result of a negotiated social construction, not merely the result of the enforcement of rules. In addition, this study also confirms that challenges are not merely obstacles, but rather part of the process that shapes the very meaning of leadership itself.

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the limited number of participants, consisting of only one school principal (RA), and the use of a case study approach make the findings highly contextual and limit their generalizability to all elementary schools with different characteristics. Second, the data were primarily obtained from the principal's perspective and therefore do not fully represent the experiences of teachers, students, and parents as other key actors in the development of a culture of discipline. Third, the data collection process relied on interviews and observations conducted over a limited period, which may not have fully captured the dynamics of discipline, particularly long-term changes. In addition, the researcher's background in education may have influenced the interpretation of the data, both in understanding and interpreting the observed leadership practices. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants, employ broader source triangulation, and be conducted over a longer period to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that school principal leadership in building a culture of discipline cannot be understood as a linear, rule-based process alone, but rather as a reflective, relational, and contextual social practice. The main findings indicate that a culture of discipline is developed through consistent role modeling, dynamic social interactions, and processes of meaning negotiation among school principals, teachers, and students. In this context, discipline is not merely compliance with rules but rather the outcome of value internalization that develops through shared experiences in everyday school life.

Furthermore, this study provides new insights into the role of school principals, who function not only as controllers of the school system but also as facilitators of meaning who shape collective awareness of the importance of discipline. Participants' experiences demonstrate that leadership practices are constantly situated within a dilemma between firmness and a humanistic approach, as well as between maintaining authority and fostering interpersonal closeness. This perspective enriches the study of educational leadership by positioning emotional, relational, and contextual dimensions as important elements that have received relatively limited attention in

more structural approaches. Thus, this study makes a conceptual contribution by shifting the understanding of leadership from a paradigm of control toward a paradigm of social construction.

Practically, the findings of this study have important implications for various stakeholders. For educational policymakers, the findings emphasize the importance of developing policies that focus not only on disciplinary regulations but also on strengthening the capacity of school principals to exercise humanistic and reflective leadership. For curriculum development and educational practice, an approach is needed that integrates disciplinary values as part of the school culture rather than treating them merely as rules to be obeyed. In addition, within the social practices of the school environment, this study demonstrates that the success of developing discipline depends greatly on the quality of social relationships and the consistency of values collectively established by all members of the school community.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations that should be critically acknowledged. Its focus on a single elementary school context with one participant makes the findings highly contextual and limits their broader generalizability. In addition, the predominance of data representing the school principal's perspective does not fully capture the experiences of teachers, students, and parents in a comprehensive manner. The limited duration of data collection may also have constrained the depth of exploration of the long-term dynamics of the school's disciplinary culture. Therefore, the findings should be understood as an in-depth account of a particular context rather than as a universal representation.

For future development, further research is recommended to employ more diverse methodological approaches, such as multi-case studies or ethnographic approaches, to broaden the understanding of leadership and disciplinary culture dynamics across different school contexts. Expanding the range of participants to include teachers, students, and parents is also necessary to obtain more comprehensive perspectives. Further exploration of aspects such as power relations, student identity, and the influence of the social environment is important for uncovering dimensions that remain unexplored in the present study. Accordingly, future research is expected to extend and enrich the understanding of educational leadership as an evolving social practice embedded within diverse contexts.

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